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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Priests for Life, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The priority theme of the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges", is critically important and needs to be addressed in all phases of a woman's life cycle. Today's changing world, with increases in ageing populations, a scarcity of workers and changing climates, present new challenges to rural women who are disproportionately illiterate and caught in the widening gap of "the feminization of poverty". Their vital contributions to family, community and country often go unrecognized and unrewarded.

Rural women's empowerment must be consistent and constant throughout the life cycle. Beginning in utero, the girl child's life must be protected and respected and not destroyed by sex-selective abortion. This earliest and deadliest form of discrimination is the ultimate destroyer of women. Female infanticide adds to this unacceptable disregard for the lives and value of girls. In *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men*, author Mara Hvistendahl puts the number of missing girls in Asia at 163 million, more than the entire female population of the United States of America.

As the girl child ages, this attitude of utter disregard for her life results in deprivation of nutritious food and poor access to health care and education. This then extends into adulthood, when rural women are often denied credit, inheritance rights and land ownership as they labour in the fields using outdated farming equipment and methods. Frequently, rural women are unpaid workers on family farms and receive no economic protection or security.

Empowering rural women reduces poverty and improves the lives of millions of women, children and men caught in the cycle of hunger and poverty. Empowering women with innovations for farming and food storage and preparation reduces the burdens on young girls who can be freed from chores to attend school.

As women experience life's milestones of pregnancy and childbirth they should not have to deny their feminine nature, be made to feel second class to men, or be penalized for their unique procreative capacity. During the reproductive years, rural women deserve policies and programmes to help them and their children to survive and thrive. The dignity of motherhood needs to be affirmed and assisted so women can be empowered as they assume the essential task of child-rearing and caregiving with assistance from rural fathers.

From care for children in their wombs, care for newborns, care for children, care of husbands, care of the sick, care of the disabled and care of the elderly, women commit themselves to the very survival of others. This critical work is often not valued for its innate worth and contribution to affirming the dignity of each human person. As they age, women continue to contribute to the family's needs as grandmothers in multigenerational households with no official payment for their vital work. Rural women's contributions both in the household and in the field to eradicate hunger and contribute to development are essential and deserving of support and recognition.

In order for rural women to experience authentic empowerment, the following must be provided:

(a) Protection from abuse, violence and exploitation

The lives of rural women and girls are empowered when women's human dignity is affirmed by measures that protect them from sexual exploitation and violence. Girls should not fear sexual assault while collecting firewood or walking to school. Laws that prevent trafficking in women for sexual exploitation or forced labour need to be enacted and enforced. Elderly women need protection from abuse.

(b) Access to education and literacy

Education and the ability to read and write are key to rural women obtaining the knowledge and skills needed to advance their status. Societies benefit when girls receive an education and improve their lives and economic livelihoods. Pregnant girls must be allowed to receive an education. Education needs to be available to all girls and women to reduce the unacceptably high female illiteracy rate. Education not only empowers women with reading, writing and mathematics skills but also results in the self-confidence and empowerment that help women to assume leadership roles in their communities.

(c) Access to health care

Life-affirming health care throughout the life cycle is needed not only for women's empowerment but also to save their lives. Rural women need transportation to health clinics during childbirth to ensure delivery with a skilled birth attendant who is able to recognize the signs of obstructed childbirth and prevent fistulas. Rural women need access to clean blood, antibiotics, treatment for life-threatening disorders and the prevention and treatment of disease. Initiatives that seek to deny or destroy the inherent procreative ability of women do not advance or empower women. Rather, programmes that include access to abortion treat women's unique capabilities as a problem rather than recognizing the universally valued role of women as the bearers of a country's future, its children. Health care in any form, including maternal and reproductive health, that includes access to abortion is not health care. Abortion ends the life of one patient and may injure the other physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. True rights and freedoms for women will never exist until women's reproductive capacity is valued and their children are cherished by the men who father them.

(d) Access to employment, job training and microcredit

Opportunities for training and job skills help rural women to improve their lives and rise from poverty. Microcredit loans provide rural women with the means necessary for starting small businesses to earn money to help the family. Such a woman receives respect from others in the community who look to her for leadership, resulting in decision-making and political involvement. Employment practices that discriminate against pregnant women must end and pregnant women must not be threatened with job loss. Women must be allowed to fulfil their innate capacity to bear and care for children without penalty. Rural women need to be able to own and inherit land.

(e) Access to resources and technology

Rural women need access to basic resources for daily life, including clean water, sanitation, nutritious food, housing and a clean cooking source. The use of cookstoves to reduce exposure to unhealthy cooking practices improves the lives of women and girls and frees them from the long hours of food preparation and the burdensome and often dangerous task of gathering firewood. Community wells provide precious water and free women from long daily walks to collect water. Sanitation improves the lives of women, respects their dignity and provides security for daily needs while reducing the spread of contaminants and disease. Modern farming techniques and access to seeds improve the lives of rural women and help in the production of a more reliable and abundant crop.

Conclusion

Poverty and hunger eradication and moves towards authentic and sustainable development can make great progress by first recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of rural women's contributions to the production of food crops and the care they render to the multigenerational family and greater community.

Rural women should be valued and their lives respected throughout the life cycle. Cultural practices that devalue the life of the girl child and women must be stopped. Rural women should be assisted in the critical role of mother and provided with opportunities for education and employment that affirm and allow for their unique and natural capacity to bear and raise children. Emergency obstetric care and access to health care should be provided with a view to reducing maternal deaths among rural women. When women and girls have access to education, it is not only their lives that improve, but the lives of their children and community. Education provides the most effective path out of poverty. Women who receive educational opportunities are healthier and their children are healthier. Educated women have healthier pregnancies and safer deliveries, resulting in healthier newborns and in reductions in both maternal and child mortality. Progress towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals can be made by improving the lives of rural women.